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ABSTRACT

The new trend in writing instruction is toward "content area writing"--the rhetorical situations and composing problems that students will face in their non-English courses and in their professions. The focus of content writing instruction should be to prescribe the inventional techniques that are common to all forms of writing, and to survey the writing skills and structural constraints that are peculiar to the discourse of specific disciplines. Current writing theory suggests a number of inventional options and restrictions with which students must cope during their academic and professional careers. Reviewing this research will show teachers that rhetorical invention in the early stages of any composing process is important, and that problem solving is a skill generalizable to any kind of writing. The heuristics that apply to any given writing tasks can be evaluated for their transcendency, flexibility, and generative capacity. Structural consciousness--awareness of the constraints that particular forms of writing place on the writer's freedom of invention--is another factor that freshman composition students need to learn. These options and limitations are just a sampling of the things that content area writing classes must discuss. (RL)

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Inventional Theory and Writing in the Content Areas in Freshman English

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The most common worry of teachers who have tried to teach (and use) invention is that the techniques create too much clutter: a clutter of time in trying to show students how to use the techniques and a clutter of ideas making for an embarrassment of riches and refuse that students cannot distinguish. Just as Chaucer had his Parliament of Fowls, and the Renaissance its Paradise of Dainty Devices, many composition teachers feel plagued by a Scourge of Rhetorical Heuristics. Curiously similar anxieties have been raised by sentence combining, as teachers who believe there is truth behing the theory and techniques try to contend with the wonderful and horrifyingly baroque constructions of students who take imbedding and combining to ever greater heights and depths.

Clutter is the central challenge of the "New Rhetoric," which, by the way, has been new for nearly twenty-five years. The prevailing model of the writing process is no longer having the writer simply fill in correctly any number of precedent formal structures but, rather, letting the writer generate more material than needed and then selecting and shaping so that form arises from immediate, practical rhetorical needs. But this shift in models is fairly well known, if not accepted, by now, and certainly the publishers have begun to catch on. What seems to be really new is the push for teaching writing in the content areas, a term that is catching on much the same as teaching reading in the content areas did ten or fifteen years ago. To the potential clutter of process-oriented approaches to composition we are now asked to add the special requirements of writing for other disciplines, even in freshman English.

These two trends in composition teaching and research need to be

brought closer together: one, the widespread recognition that the skills of invention are at least as important as the skills of making sentences and paragraphs, and two, the increasing practice of introducing the situations and strategies of non-literary-critical writing, that is, content writing, in freshman courses. By "content writing" I mean the rhetorical situations and composing problems students will face in non-English courses and the professions.

Three provocative questions lead to this current concern. First, "How different is content writing from the writing done in typical freshman composition courses?" Setting aside the truism that Alfred Kitzhaber and others have documented about there being no "typical" freshman composition course, most English teachers do not know very much about the differences and send their students out of English 101 with an uneasy hope that some of the skills will become habits that will serve in Sociology 201.

The second question is, "If writing in English 101 is different from content area writing, what justifications can English teachers muster for assigning a three-paragraph theme on euthanasia rather than a cross-cultural demographic analysis?" The common thread of most justifications is that there is a value to developing certain universal writing skills in some kind of rarefied air, such as the literary paper or the five-hundred-word theme, and then after freshman English, opening the vacuum jar to see if the writing can survive in an impure world.

After accepting the value of content area writing in freshman English (which surely will not be accepted by all), the third question is,

"What useful inventional techniques, if any, have other disciplines developed as part of the writing process for their respective fields?" To answer this question requires examining how writers and thinkers have described creativity and insight in the particular discipline and how specific plans for discourse in the discipline are described. The obvious umbrella question for those interested in inventional theory is, "How do content area inventional techniques, if they exist, compare with the techniques of neoclassical topics as adapted by Corbett, D'Angelo, and others; Rohman and Wlecke's prewriting; Burke's pentad; and Young, Becker, and Pike's tagmemic invention?

The earliest rhetorical theorists dealt in their own ways with the problem of reliable inventional techniques for different subjects. For Plato and Aristotle, their precursors, and immediate followers, when fact or scientific proof could not validate a proposition, discourse became a two-fold problem of how to present the subject and how to work on the audience. The one required a critical methodology, and the other a view of human nature. Plato thought that dialectic was the universal technique for arriving at truth, calling it the "coping stone" of all other sciences. Aristotle advanced his system of topoi and enthymemic reasoning as the most reliable inventional strategies. As the original unified art of rhetoric, including invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery, began to break up into codified school subjects, there was little confidence that any "coping stone" method of invention existed or could be designed.

The problem that composition teachers have now, if they are prepared

to help students with not only basic technical and rhetorical skills but with the special problems of writing for particular disciplines and professions, is how to teach the early stages of composing. Specifically, will the inventional skills that students learn in English courses be challenged or even set aside by faculty members, professionals, and style manuals outside the English department? Are there thinking skills that embrace all disciplines, or must composition teachers discover or invent subject-specific prewriting skills? Lee Odell has addressed this dilemma by citing the need to "identify the conceptual activities writers need to engage in as they try to understand and write about specific sets of data in [English] and in other disciplines."[1] The central question that Odell asks but does not answer is whether to create dozens or hundreds of heuristic procedures for different writing tasks, or to adapt two or three powerful procedures to all writing tasks.

Odell's unwillingness to resolve this dilemma is a healthy reservation at this stage in our understanding of how writers write. Two of the more articulate theorists of composing, however, seem to be urging a confidence in what might be called a unified field theory of writing, and by association, invention--a modern version of Plato's coping stone. In her important article, "Writing as a Mode of Learning," Janet Emig follows through on the work of James Britton, Jerome Bruner, and Linda Flower and John Hayes in suggesting that the process of writing has attributes quite remarkably similar to powerful learning techniques, and that writing is an essential method of learning any discipline, skill, or subject matter. In Emig's sense, the process and product of writing are not so much a dichotomy,

as some have claimed, as two absolutely necessary parts of learning: process, a coming to knowledge or insight, and product, the conceptualizing of knowledge. In her words, "written verbal language requires the establishment of systematic connections and relationships. Clear writing by definition is that writing which signals without ambiguity the nature of conceptual relationships,"[2] the crucial feature of successful learning in any field.

Janice Lauer implies that a universal method of invention is possible by identifying three criteria for choosing among heuristic models. The first criterion, transcendency, requires that a procedure not be "data-conditioned"; it must be useful in all possible writing situations. The second criterion, flexible order, requires the procedure to allow for recursiveness in the different stages of composing. And the third criterion, generative capacity, tests the procedure's ability to yield subject matter along with new insights and relationships.[3] Lauer hopes that a heuristic procedure meeting all three criteria will allow students to move out of the composition class without having to devote energy to learning new models and, thus, free other teachers from having to teach new models. This would surely be the best of all possible pedagogical worlds, but it may require an interdisciplinary cooperation that few schools (though the number is increasing) have or may be able to achieve.

In any case, the important questions to answer if content area writing is to have a place in freshman composition courses are, "Do other inventional models than those the New Rhetoric has provided exist in other fields, and, if they do, should they supplant or interact with those

students might learn in English courses?"

There is insufficient space here to answer these questions with any breadth or depth, but a brief survey of inventional advice given in one area, technical writing, will help to anticipate the problems of incorporating other kinds of content writing in introductory courses.

In addition to Lauer's three criteria for evaluating heuristic procedures, W. Ross Winterowd has identified four convenient operational categories for classifying sets of inventional topics.[4] He proposes, first, that lists of topoi, or inventional probes, can be finite or non-finite. If all possible questions can be classed under the terms of a set of topics, the set is finite; if the set is open-ended, requiring additional terms to answer additional questions, the set is non-finite. Second, Winterowd says that inventional topics can be either content-oriented or form-oriented. Using Lauer's three criteria and Winterowd's four operational categories, I run the risk of alienating readers of various theoretical persuasions with a raft of jargon; nonetheless, these are two very flexible and highly generative heuristics that mesh well for examining other heuristics.

Technical/scientific writing, of course, takes many forms and aims at many audiences. My more or less random survey of articles for teachers and texts for technical writers showed an extremely heightened structural consciousness pervading any advice that could be said to deal remotely with invention. Robert Day's article, "How to Write a Scientific Paper," expresses an extreme-sounding but representative position on the early

stages of technical writing: ". . . the preparation of a scientific paper has almost nothing to do with writing per se. It is a question of organization. . . . The preparer of a scientific paper is not really an author."[5] In their text, The Science of Science Writing, Judson Monroe, Carole Meredith, and Kathleen Fisher suggest that a technical paper be formed by a process called "incremental writing," in which writing the traditional parts of such a paper parallels the stages of research and problem solving: the prospectus or introduction should be written when the problem or unknown is first conceived and analyzed, defining key terms, identifying necessary types of data, and describing desirable procedures. The next recommended step is to brainstorm key words to set up the review of previous research, after which the synopsis of relevant research is to be written. Next comes the report of data collection and organization, and finally, the discussion and interpretation of results. The authors claim that writing these sections of the paper after the entire research effort is over rather than as each parallel activity is carried out would sacrifice the immediacy of discovery to a mechanical exercise.[6] Whatever the sequence or time of writing, the point is that the terms of writing are the terms of the discourse's structure. The advice is about what goes on in the different sections, what their purposes and interrelations are.

While such advice may be indispensable, properly speaking, it is not even in the realm of heuristics, not being transcendent, flexible, or highly generative. However, specific plans for doing certain things in certain places of a piece of discourse do constitute a finite set of form-oriented topics, and whether the writer is preparing a traditional

scientific paper, an operations manual, a cost efficiency analysis, or a budget report, a prewriting knowledge of the best or expected structure is not only a useful but an essential inventional tool.

Moving back to invention and content area writing in freshman English, the problem would appear to be this: we have taught a writer the principle of recursiveness in the writing process and a repertoire of free-writing and heuristic procedures for generating material; now we want the writer to gravitate toward the special problems of technical writing, where expectations of form and content are fairly regularly prescribed. Do the neoclassical topics, the pentad, metaphor-making, or the particle-wave-field matrix have any value and, if so, where? The danger of extreme clutter enters here, but some degree of clutter is a fact of any writer's rhetorical world. What students need to know as much as how to write coherent sentences and paragraphs is how to turn the clutter of inventional options and restrictions into choices that work. But how?

When form and content appear to be mostly prescribed, as in technical writing, the writer needs to know at what points in the structure of discourse a repertoire of inventional skills will be productive. In the traditional scientific paper, the initial prospectus and closing discussion of results yield most readily to heuristic questioning. The same principle applies to writing in any area: the writer needs to know the necessary kinds of conceptual activity and the forms in which the results of such activity are expressed. My guess, and it is only a guess, is that most advice for specialized writing, if it says anything about invention, will be more or less systematic sets of form-oriented topics. For content-

oriented topics, writers are best served by prewriting, neoclassical topics, the pentad, and tagmemic invention.

The one inventional skill that is generalizable to and absolutely necessary for any kind of writing is rhetorical problem solving. Linda Flower and John Hayes' important work in this area has shown that experienced, effective writers generate far more new ideas in response to their (the writers') representation of rhetorical problems than in response to subject matter alone. Echoing Walter Ong's idea that the writer's audience is always a fiction, Flower and Hayes claim rightly that successful writers in any field pose a more complete and accurate profile of the rhetorical situation than less successful writers.[7]

Unless students in introductory writing courses are exposed to the situations of content area writing, we can have little hope that inventional techniques used in a three-paragraph theme on euthanasia will help generate an effective cross-cultural demographic analysis.

Notes

[1] "The Process of Writing and the Process of Learning," College Composition and Communication, 31 (1980), 43.

[2] College Composition and Communication, 28 (1977), 126.

[3] "Toward a Metatheory of Heuristic Procedures," College Composition and Communication, 30 (1979), 268-269.

[4] "'Topics' and Levels in the Composing Process," College English, 34 (1973), 701-709.

[5] IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication, 20 (1977), p. 33.

[6] (Dubuque: Kendall/Hunt, 1977), pp. 8 ff.

[7] "The Cognition of Discovery," College Composition and Communication, 31 (1980), 30 f.